

**“CITY BEFORE SELF”: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
PLUTARCH’S ETHICAL-POLITICAL THOUGHT AND
IGWEBUIKE COMMUNAL PHILOSOPHY**

Kolawole Chabi, O.S.A., PhD
Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum"
Rome, Italy
kolachabi@gmail.com

Executive Summary

This paper studies some aspects of Plutarch’s ethical-political thought in comparison with the Igwebuiké philosophy. So, it exposes, on the one hand, how Plutarch insists on the need for citizens, especially those involved in politics to seek first the good of the community and give priority to the progress of society above personal achievements. On the other hand, the paper presents the communitarian/communal view that springs from the Igwebuiké understanding of life in the community. We present the positions of various African thinkers who reason along the line of this worldview to establish that community does have pride of place in the African conception of life together. The last step in this study is a synthesis of Plutarch’s ideas and the Igwebuiké philosophy. We discover that mutatis mutandis, what Plutarch advocates for his Greek compatriots, constitutes the underlining principle of the Igwebuiké worldview. Moreover, this confirms the universality of this emerging trend in African philosophy.

Keywords: Plutarch, Philosophy, Common Good, Igwebuiké, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Community, African.

Introduction

The reading of a new translation of the works of Plutarch¹ recently published in the “Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers Series” of Princeton University Press prompted me to undertake the present study in order to compare the vision of an ancient Western thinker with the African Igwebuiké worldview. The basic principle of Plutarch’s political thought, and the common thread to his works in the new translation, can be aptly summarised as ‘*city before self*’. This line of thought seems to rhyme well with the African Igwebuiké communal thought.

In this paper, we shall present the underlying presuppositions and orientations of Plutarch’s political and moral philosophy, on the one hand, and the Igwebuiké worldview, on the other hand, to draw the similarities and differences between a representative of Ancient Western cultural thought and a specific line of African philosophical *pensée*. Both the works of Plutarch and secondary literature on them are abundant, and we shall depend on authoritative studies on the topic to back up our line of argument in the first part of the article. Concerning studies on the *Igwebuiké* approach to reality, a lot of studies are going on, and works of I. A. Kanu and other African scholars testify to it. We will precisely depend on most of their scientific research in the field of African philosophical thought in the second part of the paper.

The paper will begin with a brief presentation of Plutarch’s biography and an exposition of the significant aspects of his ethical and political thoughts, most notably regarding common life. The second segment of the paper will be devoted to the *Igwebuiké* philosophy on communality. In a synthesis of our itinerary, we will draw the similarities in Plutarch’s thought and *Igwebuiké* understanding of common life before bringing the study to its conclusion.

¹ Cf. Plutarch, *How to Be a Leader: An Ancient Guide to Wise Leadership. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*, transl. J. Beneker, Princeton University Press, 2019.

Plutarch and his Conception of Moral Virtue and Political Engagement

Plutarch: A profile

Plutarch was born and educated in Chaeronea, a small village located about sixty-seven miles northwest of Athens. He spoken with warmth of his family: his wife, Timoxena; his father, Autobulus, his grandfather, Lamprias, for whom he expresses special admiration, and his brothers, Timon and Lamprias. Plutarch deeply loved his wife, Timoxena, and their five children, only two of whom survived into adulthood. We have the *Consolation to his wife* (608A–612B) that he wrote after the death of their only daughter at the age of two. It remains a moving testimonial to his love of family. His views on his own marriage can be summed up in one of his memorable quotes: “*Very fortunate is the man who in the entire span of his life knows from the beginning only one woman, the one whom he marries*” (*Cat. Min.* 7.3).²

² Cf. M. Beck, *Introduction. Plutarch in Greece*, in *A Companion to Plutarch*, ed. M. Beck, Wiley Blackwell 2014, 2. It is interesting to note that Plutarch’s thought on marriage, women and sexuality has gained interest among scholars of late. Interested readers could see for example S. B. Pomeroy, *Reflections on Plutarch*, “*A consolation to his wife*”, in *Plutarch’s “Advice to the bride and groom” and “A consolation to his wife”*: *English translations, commentary, interpretive essays, and bibliography*, ed. S. B. Pomeroy, Oxford University Press 1999, 75-81;

P. A. Stadter, Φιλόσοφος και φίλανδρος: *Plutarch’s view of women in the “Moralia” and the “Lives”*, in *Plutarch’s “Advice to the bride and groom”*, 173-182. In this paper, Stadter demonstrates that Plutarch’s writing addressed to women, especially to Clea (“*Virtues in women*” and “*Isis and Osiris*”), reveals the level of education and philosophical sophistication he expected in them. «*Isis and Osiris*» considers his metaphysical basis for the virtues and limits of female action. Examples of women’s virtues in “*Virtues of women*” and the “*Lives*” suggest that he expected women not to act as independent agents.

P. Walcot, *Plutarch on Women*, in *Symbolae Osloenses: Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 74 (1999), 163-183. According to Walcot, the evidence offered by the “*Lives*” and the “*Moralia*” shows that Plutarch had a low opinion of women, regarding them as being deceitful, savage, sexually insatiable, frivolous and gossips. Women are thought to be weak, but at the same time, dangerous. There are,

Although he was born in the “poor, little town” of Chaeronea, Plutarch was hardly the “dull, stupid person” the name has come to connote in modern times. Judging from the respect he got while still living, and the acclaim some of his works handed down through the centuries, he was one bright and witty fellow – so much so that Montaigne would later claim that it was by reading Plutarch’s *Lives* that the rest of us “dunces” are “raised out of the dirt.”³

He received much of his early education from the reputed Egyptian philosopher, Ammonius, with whom he lived during an extended stay in Athens as a young man of twenty years.⁴ His education was augmented by conversations at the dinner table with his family, relatives, and circle of friends.⁵ We can acquire an approximate idea of what these evening sessions may have been like from reading Plutarch’s lengthy *Table Talks* (*Quaest. conv.* 612C–748D).⁶ By the time he was an older man, he had a reputation of being a very learned and wise man. Much of his adult life was devoted to social, civic and

however, notable exceptions, most obviously those women whose stories are related in the “*Mulierum virtutes*”; Id., *Plutarch on Sex, in Greece and Rome: Journal of the Classical Association* 45/2 (1998), Series 2, 166-187. In this paper Walcot indicates that some of Plutarch’s works reveal his heavily prejudiced and grossly inhibited attitude toward sex.

On family and its importance in the development of the person in the thought of Plutarch, see Fr. Albini, *Family and the Formation of Character. Aspects of Plutarch’s Thought*, in *Plutarch and his intellectual world. Essays on Plutarch*, ed. J. Mossman, London 1997, 59-70.

J. Beneker, *Sex, eroticism, and politics*, in *A Companion to Plutarch*, 503-515; Id., *The passionate statesman: Eros and politics in Plutarch’s « Lives »*, Oxford University Press 2012.

³ Cf. B. J. Verkamp, *Plutarch*, in *Encyclopaedia of Philosophers on Religion*, ed. B. J. Verkamp, McFarland 2008, 152.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵ *De tuend. san.* 133E.

⁶ Cf. M. Beck, *Introduction. Plutarch in Greece*, 2. An interesting study of the life of Plutarch is that of F. Klotz, *Portraits of the philosopher: Plutarch’s self-presentation in the «Quaestiones convivales»*, in *Classical Quarterly nova series* 57/2 (2007), 650-667.

literary activities. He focussed on taking care of his family, serving as a magistrate in Chaeronea, representing his hometown and country on various missions to Rome (where he also briefly gave lectures on philosophy). He also produced a vast body of writings (most notably, the *Parallel Lives*). It is not an exaggeration to say that Plutarch was a prolific writer. His literary legacy testifies to it. The so-called *Lamprias catalogue*, an ancient library catalogue incompletely preserved, supposedly compiled by Plutarch’s son Lamprias, lists 227 works, of which several are no longer in existence.⁷ Plutarch’s works are classified into philosophical and historical-biographical. The latter, the so-called *Lives* of distinguished Greek and Roman men examined in pairs, demonstrate Plutarch’s historical and rhetorical abilities, also showing his interest in character formation and politics.⁸ Plutarch’s philosophical works, predominantly dialogues (set in Delphi or Chaeronea), cover half of his literary production. In modern times, they have been published under the collective term, *Moralia*. However, as Karamanolis rightly observed, when Plutarch’s collection was augmented by many other writings preserved in other manuscripts on various other topics, ranging from metaphysics, psychology, natural philosophy, theology, logic, to philosophy of art, the name was retained with the misleading implication that Plutarch’s philosophical works are essentially or primarily ethical.⁹

One can say that, of all the writers of classical antiquity, Plutarch is, without a shadow of a doubt, one of the most popular to contemporary readers. He certainly owes this popularity to the nature of his genius, to the choice of subjects he dealt with, to the eternal interest in the names of the great men whose images he painted. Enough by way of presentation!

⁷ Cf. D. A. Russell, *Plutarch*, London 1973, 18-19.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 100-116.

⁹ Cf. G. Karamanolis, *Plutarch*, in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* online <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plutarch/#PluPl> accessed on 24/07/2020.

Plutarch's ethical and political postulates in favour of Common Good

In terms of philosophical literary production, Plutarch gives pride of place to ethics in this thought, and this is characteristic of his age. He believes philosophy is a way of life. Such a position was familiar with the Hellenistic philosophers whose worldview he shares from that perspective, even though he criticises Stoics and Epicureans for proposing what he considered misguided ethical ideals.¹⁰ Likewise, concerning the involvement of philosophers in politics, Plutarch criticizes these philosophers. He finds fault with the early Stoics for their abstaining from taking part in political activities.¹¹ In the same line of thought, the political quietism of Epicurus and his school, according to him, amounts to abrogating or abolishing laws and political community.¹² Nevertheless, when it comes to some

¹⁰ Cf. Plut. *An recte dictum sit latenter esse vivendum* 1129F-1130E. Some scholars have noted elements of exaggeration in Plutarch's attacks on Stoics and Epicureans. That is the position of A. Pierron in the introductory part of his French translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. Pierron wrote: "*Il est certain, d'ailleurs, que son attachement trop exclusif pour le platonisme l'a rendu injuste envers les stoïciens.*" Cf. A. Pierron, *Notice sur Plutarque*, in *Plutarque I. Vies des hommes illustres*, transl. A. Pierron Paris 1853, iv. Kamaranolis, in his article cited above, justifies Plutarch's reaction to the leading Hellenistic schools of thought thus: "Plutarch engaged in writing so many polemical works against the two main Hellenistic schools of philosophy. One reason for Plutarch's preoccupation must be that the early Stoics and Epicureans both strongly criticized Plato. The Epicurean Colotes, for instance, Plutarch's target in the *Against Colotes*, was critical of Plato's dialogues in his *Against Plato's Lysis* and *Against Plato's Euthydemus* [...] while he also criticized the Republic's myth of Er and the implied view of an immortal human soul [...]. Another reason for Plutarch's engagement was the fact that both Epicureans and Stoics drew freely and extensively for their purposes on Plato without acknowledging it and despite their criticism of Plato." See also M. Montiel – J. Francisco, *Plutarco transmisor de la filosofía epicúrea: el «Contra Colotes» entre polémica y didáctica*, in *Plutarco e l'età ellenistica: atti del convegno internazionale di studi: Firenze, 23-24 settembre 2004*, ed. A. Casanova, Firenze 2005, 337-350; M. Isnardi Parente, *Plutarco contro Colote*, in *Aspetti dello stoicismo e dell'epicureismo in Plutarco. Atti del II Convegno di studi su Plutarco, Ferrara, 2-3 aprile 1987*, ed. I. Gallo, Ferrara, 1988. 65-88.

¹¹ Cf. Plut., *De Stoic. repugn.* 1033BC.

¹² Cf. Id., *Adv. Col.* 1125C; 1127D.

fundamental elements of virtual life in society, for Stoics and Platonists, a man educated in philosophy was expected to mould the character of the people in his community through his example of virtuous conduct, prudent advice and continuous efforts on behalf of the common good.

For Plutarch, as a Platonist, appropriate conduct towards the community meant placing the common welfare ahead of one’s private interests, including acts of beneficence towards that community and initiatives to preserve the liberty, harmony and wellbeing of all groups within the State.¹³ Plutarch’s encouragement to seek common good is a particularly vital element of his thought that calls attention to what we shall see later when examining the communal dimension of *Igwebuike*. The common welfare is supposed to supersede the personal interest to guarantee a better life together.

The concept of “political virtue” (πολιτικὴ ἀρετή) embraces excellence in all these activities—from cultivating moral improvement in others through one’s own virtuous character, to taking effective action to improve the conditions of life in the community. As S. Jacobs summarily put it, the distinction between the “virtue” of a statesman (politikos) and that of an ordinary “good man” is based on the sphere in which virtue is exercised (public versus private action) and those on behalf of whom action is taken (the common good of the State as a whole versus the individual caring for his soul). In that light, she argues, both Aristotle and Plutarch agree that the highest expression of practical virtue for human beings is “political virtue”. Since public virtue benefits more people than private virtue, public virtue is a “higher degree” of virtue than virtue in private life.¹⁴ Political virtue was deemed the “most complete” or “perfect” virtue

¹³ Cf. Susan Jacobs, *Plutarch’s Pragmatic Biographies Lessons for Statesmen and Generals in the Parallel Lives* (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition), Leiden-Boston 2018, 18.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* note 31.

(τελεώτατα) because it combined the qualities of a virtuous character (courage, temperance and justice), a willingness to place the good of the community ahead of self-interest (magnanimity) and effective action on behalf of the common good (φρόνησις).¹⁵

Plutarch's work, *Political Precepts*, treats a wide range of practical functions that require both a moral foundation of temperance, mildness, justice and dedication to the common good, as well as critical judgment about how to administer the city, maintain harmony between groups, foster prosperity and conduct diplomacy to protect its liberty and security. Indeed, in this treatise, moral virtue is not desirable for its own sake, but as a tool of effective leadership: it produces a reputation for incorruptibility that makes a statesman more persuasive, and it empowers reason to guide his judgment on behalf of his State.¹⁶ Moreover, sometimes, a politician with the qualities of a philosopher fails as a politician where someone who is less qualified as a philosopher proves to be superior as a politician. In real life, then, the good of a community cannot be reached by philosophy alone, persuasion appears to be a necessary instrument, and popular appeal is a value not to be underestimated.¹⁷

Giving pride of place to the interests of the community is not only presented as a feature of a philosophical attitude, but also as a morally noble action. Such is the importance that Plutarch places on the good of the community over the individual interest or the satisfaction of a small circle of friends, that we could say that, for him, a specific action, which is *in se* morally reprehensible, may nonetheless be justified if it is beneficial to the State. In his work, *Alcibiades*, Plutarch has one of his characters argue that: "one who had an eye to the general welfare of the community (τὸ συμφέρον) may betray a few

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ Cf. M. van Raalte, More Philosophico: *Political virtue and Philosophy on Plutarch's Lives*, in *The Statesman in Plutarch's Works. Volume II: The Statesman in Plutarch's Greek and Roman Lives*, eds. L. De Blois et al., Leiden-Boston 2005, 111.

dubious persons, if he could thereby save many good men from the anger of the people”.¹⁸ Politics is concerned with the highest interests of the community. When it is practised rightly, one does not strive to attain wealth or fame; the purpose is to serve the community.¹⁹

To bring our study on Plutarch to an end, we deem it fitting to add his opinion on the role older people play in the life of their community. In his work titled "*An seni sit gerenda res publica*" (*Whether an Old Man should engage in public Affairs*), Plutarch argues that older people have much to offer, not only on account of their years of experience, but also because they are less prone than their younger colleagues to give in to their passions. Older people, he maintains, are more reasonable in their judgements and less inclined to impulsiveness than young people. For Plutarch, the primary function of senior politicians was to teach their younger colleagues in both word and deed. He instructs his readers, for example, on how to support young leaders and how to correct them without giving offence or creating hostility. In this way, older politicians could pass on their wisdom and experience to the next generation of leaders. Plutarch beautifully puts his idea thus:

It is not right to say, or to accept when said by others, that the only time when we do not grow weary is when we are making money. On the contrary, we ought even to emend the saying of Thucydides and believe, not only that “the love of honour never grows old,” but that the same is even truer of the spirit of service to the community and the State, which persists to the end even in ants and bees. For no one ever saw a bee that had on account of age become a drone, as some people claim that public men, when they have passed their prime, should sit down in retirement at home and be fed, allowing their worth in

¹⁸ Plut., *Alcibiades* 21, 5.

¹⁹ Id., *An seni sit gerenda res publica* 783 E.

action to be extinguished by idleness as iron is destroyed by rust.²⁰

This passage of *Whether an Old Man should engage in public Affairs* summaries the conviction of Plutarch regarding the need for older people to be involved in public affairs, not because they do not wish to hand power over to the younger generation, but because they still have something to contribute to the common good. However, Plutarch does not support those aged men who, for the love of office, involve themselves in a busy restlessness, lying in wait for every opportunity to grab power and relevant positions in the State, seek for themselves discredit and live a toilsome and miserable life. Plutarch opines that,

to do these things even with the goodwill of others is too burdensome for advanced age, but, in fact, the result is the very opposite: for such old men are hated by the young, who feel that they do not allow them opportunities for public activity and do not permit them to come before the public, and by people, in general, their love of precedence and of office is held in no less disrepute than is other old men's love of wealth and pleasure.²¹

Granted that an old man can be useful in public affairs, there is a code of conduct he ought to observe. Plutarch makes interesting recommendations for elders who still wish to serve the common good, one who still has the honour of setting and making speech in the assembly:

He should not be constantly jumping up on the platform, nor always, like a cock, crowing in opposition to what is said ; nor should he, by getting involved in controversy, loose the curb of reverence for him in the young men's minds and instil into them the practice and custom of disobedience and unwillingness to listen to him ; but he should sometimes both slacken the reins

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 784 A.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 793 E.

and allow them to throw up their heads boldly to oppose his opinion and to show their spirit, without even being present or interfering except when the matter at stake is important for the common safety or for honour and decorum.²²

Plutarch offers a wide range of interesting ideas in favour of communal life and the common good. He calls all citizens to place the city before the self and also exhorts elders to participate in public life with the necessary prudence and wisdom. We shall now expose the *Igwebuiké* philosophy.

***Igwebuiké* Communality/Complementarity Worldview**

A Brief Definition of *Igwebuiké* Philosophy

In a recent publication, we have made our first attempt of comparison between the *Igwebuiké* philosophy of common life and the Augustinian ideal of community life as expressed in his *Rule* and other essential works.²³ This comparative study helps to establish the universality of the postulates of the new trend in African philosophy being proffered by the emerging *Igwebuiké* philosophical worldview.²⁴

Igwebuiké philosophy was developed by Professor Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu in his attempt to interpret and understand the African

²² *Ibid.*, 794 F.

²³ Cf. K. Chabi, *Augustine’s Ideal of Community vis-à-vis the communal Dimension of “Igwebuiké” African Philosophy*, in *Perspective on Igwebuiké Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Professor Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, O.S.A.*, 13-33.

²⁴ For a response to the query whether *Igwebuiké* is exclusive to the Igbo or Africa, see I. A. Kanu, *On the Origin and Principles of Igwebuiké Philosophy*, in *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 11/1 (2019), 159-176. In this paper, Kanu connected *Igwebuiké* philosophy to the oldest philosophical elucidations of presocratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, and Empedocles to show that it has been in existence for long “beyond the walls of the Igbo traditional society.” (Cf. p. 161 of the article).

reality. “*Igwebuike*” is an Igbo word, which is a combination of three other words. Thus, it can be understood as a word and as a sentence: as a word, it is written thus, *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. “*Igwe*” is a noun which means number or population, usually a large number or population. “*Bu*” is a verb, which means is. “*Ike*” is a noun, which means strength or power. Put together, it means ‘number is strength’, or ‘number is power’, that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force”.²⁵ *Igwebuike* is, therefore, along the line of the

²⁵ I. A. Kanu, *Igwebuike as a Trend in African Philosophy*, in *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2/1 (March 2016), 110. Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony. *Igwebuike and the Logic (Nka) of African Philosophy*, 14. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwe Bu Ike as an Igbo-African hermeneutics of national development. Igbo Studies Review. No. 6.* pp. 59-83. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *Igwebuike as an African integrative and progressive anthropology. NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy. Vol. 2. No. 1.* pp. 151-161. Kanu, I. A. (2018). *New Africanism: Igwebuike as a philosophical Attribute of Africa in portraying the Image of Life.* In Mahmoud Misaeli, Sanni Yaya and Rico Sneller (Eds.). *African Perspectives on Global on Global Development* (pp. 92-103). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Collaboration within the ecology of mission: An African cultural perspective. The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life. Vol. 15.* pp. 125-149. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuike research methodology: A new trend for scientific and wholistic investigation. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH). 5. 4.* pp. 95-105. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuikeconomics: The Igbo apprenticeship for wealth creation. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAAJAH). 5. 4.* pp. 56-70. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *Igwebuikecracy: The Igbo-African participatory cocio-political system of governance. TOLLE LEGE: An Augustinian Journal of the Philosophy and Theology. 1. 1.* pp. 34-45. Kanu, I. A. (2019). *On the origin and principles of Igwebuike philosophy. International Journal of Religion and Human Relations. Vol. 11. No. 1.* pp. 159-176. Kanu, I. A. (2019b). *An Igwebuike approach to the study of African traditional naming ceremony and baptism. International Journal of Religion and Human Relations. Vol. 11. No. 1.* pp. 25-50.

positions held by such African philosophers as John Mbiti,²⁶ M. Nkafu Nkembkin,²⁷ B. I. Ekwulu²⁸ and many others who pinpoint the importance of the solidarity and complementarity that underline and define the African concept of the person as a relational being. We shall now look concretely at the various expressions of *Igwebuiké* philosophy regarding communality and complementarity identifiable in some African philosophers, apart from those already mentioned.

Some Expressions of Igwebuiké Worldview among African Philosophers

It may not be a wrong step to take into consideration the thoughts of the major exponents of the first African intellectuals who gave expression to the idea of the primacy of communality in African socio-ethical life. Leopold Sédar Senghor is, without doubt, one of such prominent figures. According to him: “Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is community society.”²⁹ He further opines that “Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals.”³⁰ In these statements, we find nothing less than the aspect of *Igwebuiké*

²⁶ J. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, Nairobi 1970. The study of P. Tempels on the Bantu people of central Africa also affirms some of the basic postulates of *Igwebuiké* philosophy. He writes: “The living ‘muntu’ is in a relation of being to being with God, with his clan brethren, with his family and with his descendants. He is in a similar ontological relationship with his patrimony, his land, with all that it contains or produces, with all that grows or lives on it.” (P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris 1959, 66).

²⁷ Cf. M. Nkafu Nkembkia, *African Vitalogy. A Step forward in African Thinking*, Nairobi 1999.

²⁸ Cf. B. I. Ekwulu, *Igbo concept of Ibe (the other) as a philosophical solution to the ethnic conflicts in African countries*, in ed. Id., *Philosophical reflections on African issues*, Enugu 2010, 183-192.

²⁹ L. S. Senghor, *On African Socialism*, transl. Mercer Cook, New York 1964, 93-94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

philosophy we are studying in this section of our paper. Where people give primacy to the community, the self continues to exist. But it identifies itself with the organic body (the community) to which it belongs; hence, it does not place itself above the *ensemble*. The same opinion of Senghor holds for other advocates of African socialism, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere, who tenaciously sustained their socialist ideological choice, finding its foundation in the traditional African ideas about society.³¹ That is why K. Nkrumah could say that “If one seeks the socio-political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism,”³² which, of course, in their opinion, is the basic principle of reality in the African conception of common life.

Expressing the idea of Man as a communal being in the African culture, specifically from the perspective of his Ghanaian context, N. K. Dzobo opines that:

The individual’s being emerges from a prior social whole which is truly other; it comes into being for the sake of him and exists for his development and growth. Hence, an individual who is cut off from the communal organism is nothing. In Africa, it is true then to say: “As the glow of a coal depends upon its remaining in the fire, so the vitality, the psychic security, the very humanity of man depends on his integration into the family.” By living creatively, the individual is also contributing to the life and quality of his community and so can say “we are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore, we are.”³³

³¹ Cf. K. Gyekye, *Person and Community in African Thought*, in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*, eds. K. Wiredu – K. Gyekye, Washington DC 1992, 103.

³² K. Nkrumah, *Consciencism – Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation and Development in particular Reference to the African Revolution*, London 1964, 73.

³³ N. K. Dzobo, *The Image of Man in Africa*, in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I*, eds. K. Wiredu – K. Gyekye, Washington DC 1992, 132.

The very last quotation of Dzobo’s text, which is another version of Mbiti’s famous axiom in expression communitarianism in Africa, has been further examined in a study by I. A. Menkiti which is worth mentioning here. This scholar affirms, based on Mbiti’s statement “*I am because we are...*”, that from the African perspective, community has an ontological primacy and independence. In his words, “As far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be.”³⁴ A few postulates follow in Menkiti’s attempt to contrast the African with the Western worldview. He contends that in Africa, “it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory”.³⁵ According to him, what we find in the African understanding of the person is the notion of personhood as acquired, “something which has to be achieved, and not given simply because one is born of human seed.”³⁶ For this reason, in African societies, “personhood is something as which individuals could fail.”³⁷

All these emphatic positions on communal values, collective good and shared goals, could lead to the conclusion that communitarianism conceives the person as entirely constituted by social relationships, that it tends to suppress the moral autonomy of the person, that it makes the being and life of the individual person totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, practices and ends of the community; and as a consequence, that communitarianism would diminish the person’s freedom and capacity to choose or question or re-evaluate the shared values of the community.³⁸ For this reason, some voices rose to critically examine the African communitarian conception of the human person!

³⁴ I. A. Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, in *African Philosophy. An Introduction*, ed. R. A. Wright, Lanham, Md, 1984, 171.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁸ Cf. K. Gyekye, *Person and Community in African Thought*, 102.

In recent times, some scholars have indicated that the “we existence” ontology of person which characterizes African philosophy, represented by *Igwebuike* and the African philosophers we mentioned above, was more fitting in opposing the Western liberal individualism from a political standpoint, to reclaim human dignity for the colonized African. P. Nnodim is of the view that: “unmeasured emphasis on group-oriented ideas of the person among Africans undermines the broader metaphysical dimensions of personhood existing in the thought systems of many traditional African societies.”³⁹ Such a position is also present in K. Gyekye’s article already cited above. According to the Ghanaian philosopher, Menkiti’s position that the personhood is defined or conferred by the communal structure of the society cannot be wholly accurate, despite the natural sociality of the human person which places him in a cultural structure.⁴⁰ Gyekye posits that the human person is also, by nature, other things besides being a communitarian being. There are various attributes, such as rationality, the capacity for virtue and for evaluating and making moral judgements and choices. The community does not create these attributes but discovers and nurtures them. Moreover, when he fully uses these attributes in her participation in the life of his community, his personhood would be fully defined by the communal structure or social relationships.⁴¹ Instead of an unrestricted communitarianism expressed in the views of Senghor and others, Gyekye advocates a moderate or restricted version of communitarianism which accommodates the communal values as well as values of individuality, social commitments, including duties to self-attention (which is not individualism).

Taking a stand on what we have exposed so far, we contend that community constitutes an essential element in the African

³⁹ P. Nnodim, *The Concept of Person in African Philosophy*, in *Life, Body, Person and Self: A Reconsideration of Core Concepts in Bioethics from an Intercultural Perspective*, eds. Graetzel and Guhe, Freiburg 2017, 88.

⁴⁰ Cf. K. Gyekye, *Person and Community*, 111.

⁴¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 111-112.

understanding of reality. The human person is endowed with a life-force that can only yield and be productive if it is put at the service of common good. We agree with Gyekye that some essential human attributes are natural endowments. However, at the same time, it is vital to emphasise that from the *Igwebuiké* point of view, by nature, a human person can only put his worth to bear within a community. V. Mulago's idea on this issue captures the *Igwebuiké pensée*:

The community is the necessary and sufficient condition for the life of the individual person. The individual person is immersed into the natural world and nevertheless emerges from it as an individual and a person within his conscience a freedom given him by the mediation of the community in which he senses a certain presence of the divine.⁴²

This same idea comes in a more straightforward axiom formulated by Kanu: "*To be is to belong and to belong is to be.*"⁴³

⁴² V. Mulago, *African Heritage and contemporary Christianity*, Nairobi 1989, 115.

⁴³ I. A. Kanu, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, Jos Plateau State, 2015, 250. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuiké* as an Igbo-African philosophy for Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria. In Mahmoud Misaeli (Ed.). *Spirituality and Global Ethics* (pp. 300-310). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuiké* as an Igbo-African philosophy for the protection of the environment. *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 3. No. 4. pp. 28-38. Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuiké* as the hermeneutic of individuality and communality in African ontology. *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 162-179. Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuiké* and question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge. *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol.3 No1. pp. 131-138. Kanu, I. A. (2017a). *Igwebuiké as a philosophical attribute of Africa in portraying the image of life*. A paper presented at the 2017 Oracle of Wisdom International Conference by the Department of Philosophy, Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, 27-29 April. Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuiké* as a complementary approach to the issue of girl-child education.

Some anthropological theories, such as the Darwinist conflict theory and the Freudian theory, see man as an aggressor and a predator/destroyer by nature, who finds himself obliged to collaborate with other human beings to subjugate his aggressive instincts. From the *Igwebuike* African standpoint, such is not the understanding of the human person. The basic element of life together is the drive to complementarity within the creative synthesis of being which characterizes the African person. Furthermore, in this context, placing the common good ahead of personal interests marks the true spirit of belonging to the body. Thus, the "self", the individual person with all his natural endowments and attributes, works with the common good in mind.

The idea of complementarity that constitutes the underlining principle of *Igwebuike* finds expression also in the vital relationship that exists between the generations in the traditional African environment. Elders are highly regarded in their roles within the traditional African communities. As people who hold the stories and wisdom of the past to enlighten the present, elders have the answers to questions such as "who are we?", "where do we originate from?", "how do we keep alive the heritage handed down to us?" Because of their knowledge and life experience, elders are held in high esteem. As G. J. S. Dei puts it, in traditional African societies, people have "respect for the

Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research. Vol. 3. No. 6. pp. 11-17. Kanu, I. A. (2017b). *Igwebuike* as a wholistic response to the problem of evil and human suffering. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3 No 2, March. Kanu, I. A. (2017e). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African modality of peace and conflict resolution. *Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars*. Vol. 1. No. 1. pp. 31-40. Kanu, I. A. (2017g). *Igwebuike* and the logic (Nka) of African philosophy. *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1. pp. 1-13. Kanu, I. A. (2017h). *Igwebuike* philosophy and human rights violation in Africa. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 117-136. Kanu, I. A. (2017i). *Igwebuike* as a hermeneutic of personal autonomy in African ontology. *Journal of African Traditional Religion and Philosophy Scholars*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 14-22.

authority of elderly persons for their wisdom, knowledge of community affairs, and ‘closeness’ to the ancestors... There is in Africa a general belief that old age comes with wisdom and an understanding of the world.”⁴⁴ P. O. Onyoyo expresses the same idea stating that: “... in several African traditional societies in which customary law ruled the lives of people the role of elders was substantial and critical for order and harmony. The elders are construed to be the custodians of customary law, its promulgators and enforcers...”⁴⁵ In the Yoruba culture to which I belong, and in several other African ethnic groups, elders preside over religious ceremonies, sit as judges in cases of feud, apply corrective measures to repair the damages caused by offenders, facilitate reconciliation and harmony. As Kanu indicates in one of his studies, elders have such mastery of language that they use folktales in judging in village courts, telling tales in such a way that the people grasp their meanings without requiring further explanation.⁴⁶ Those of them with specific roles in priestly lineage pray for the community and offer sacrifice, mediating between God, people, ancestors, and spirits. They have many more vital roles for the good of their community. A very distinctive feature of elders in the Yoruba culture is the desire to hand over their knowledge to the younger generation as the time of their exit from this world draws near. A Yoruba saying states that a divinity whose cult is hidden from the offspring of its priest is doomed to disappear. So, elders are not merely preoccupied with their business in the community without regards to the younger ones. They nurture a sense of complementarity and the desire to transmit the cultural and spiritual patrimony to posterity.

⁴⁴ G. J. S. Dei, *Afrocentricity: Cornerstone to Pedagogy*, in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 25/1 (1994), 13.

⁴⁵ P. O. Onyoyo, *A Theory of Gerontocracy in the African Customary Law*, a paper published on https://www.academia.edu/9644458/A_Theory_of_Gerontocracy_in_the_African_Customary_Law, accessed on July 27th, 2020.

⁴⁶ Cf. I. A. Kanu, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion*, 77.

Plutarch's Ethical-Political Philosophy of Common Good and *Igwebuiké*

Having exposed the contents of the two worldviews we set out to compare in this paper, we shall now examine what they have in common and what differentiates them.

Plutarch's ethical-political philosophy which advocates the primacy of "city before self", to express the commitment that a good citizen should have towards the common good, finds *mutatis mutandis*, a corresponding expression in the *Igwebuiké* idea of community. Even prior to what we know about his philosophical standpoint, Plutarch's very life as a lover of family, as a man who cherished and remained viscerally attached to the service of his native Chaeronea, indicates that this ancient philosopher had a strong sense of belonging which is characteristic of the traditional African attitude toward life and community.

The same emphasis that Plutarch places on the common good the individual should strive for is present in our African worldview. It confirms the belief that the same seed of wisdom is sown in the spirit of all people of the world, irrespective of the categorisation we make to divide ourselves into groups or factions. The possibility of naturally working for the (common) good stands in opposition to the anthropological conflict theory sustained by some exponents of Western philosophy in the 19th century.

In the Greek philosopher's thought, the obligation of the good citizen towards the welfare of his social group does not suppress his personality. In his many works, and through the example of his life, Plutarch shows the importance of self-development. He never neglects the importance of the person as an individual with his attributes. Likewise, the African communitarianism affirmed by *Igwebuiké* does not obliterate the individual within the society. It only puts to the fore the importance of belonging and working for the good of the body.

Plutarch defends the need for those who, on account of their old age, are considered useless in public affairs to be active and to continue contributing to the life of their community. In the *Igwebuike* framework, elders are never discarded in their old age for retirement as far as the life of the community is considered. No one looks at them as intrusive in matters concerning public life. On the contrary, their opinion is sought and revered. An interesting aspect of Plutarch's recommendation to elders willing to continue their involvement in public life is that of being careful so as not lose the respect and consideration of the youth.

Respect for elders is distinctive of the traditional African code of conduct. But it is worthwhile to mention that, in the real sense, an elder is one who, with the advanced age, also has the wisdom, the goodness and the interest of the community at heart. Among the Yoruba, "*àgbà*" is the word for an elder. When an elderly person is referred to as "*àgbà òshì*" or "*àgbà ìyà*" (that is miserable elder), it is not necessarily because of material indigence. That adjective added to qualify him could portray some aspects of his moral and behavioural stand. A shameless elder who involves himself in baseness belongs to the category of "*àgbà òshì*". Consequently, he cannot be a point of reference to the people of his community. Both in Plutarch's society and our traditional African setting, a person could lose the respect of the community even in his old age.

By and large, we have observed some common points in the Plutarch and *Igwebuike* worldviews concerning life together and the common good. *Igwebuike* is a universal worldview expressed in the language and within the cultural environment of the *Igbo* in Nigeria. That should not come as a surprise, for every trend of thought and every philosophy has a cradle, a point of departure, a culture from which it propagates. This study contributes to the reinforcement of the

universal character of this trend as already demonstrated by I. A. Kanu.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Greek philosopher, Plutarch, has consecrated most of his works to revealing the educational power of the past by giving many historical figures as examples for today. In his thought, he laid much emphasis on the need for citizens to seek the common good and to place the well-being of the community before personal or selfish interests. His philosophical *pensée* seems to rhyme with the *Igwebuike* African philosophy in which commonality, complementarity, and seeking the common good have pride of place within the social fabric. For this reason, our study focused on the comparison of the two philosophical worldviews to establish what they have in common and what differentiates them. Apart from the concern for the common good that cut across both philosophies, the aspect of the place and role of elders within the community retained our attention, since it is present in both. Plutarch defends the importance of elders in public life. *Igwebuike* sees elders as the custodians and teachers of culture. However, to be an elder is also earned through the wisdom, kindness and exemplary life an aged person displays within his community.

In the ideal world of traditional Africa, as it was in the ancient Western and Biblical world, ageing was revered and considered a blessing. Living to see one's children's children is blessing beyond measure. In traditional Africa, elderly people were attended to and accompanied in their old age until they rested with the ancestors. It seems, however, that things are much different nowadays. Many elders suffer abuse and neglect. According to Aderemi Suleiman Ajala, among the Yoruba, for example, due to urbanisation and other social factors, the perception of ageing has changed from peaceful retirement to crisis-ridden stage of living. Some of the crises include: neglect of the elderly, poor feeding and poor health status for the aged.

⁴⁷ I. A. Kanu, *On the Origin and Principles of Igwebuike Philosophy*, in *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 11/1 (2019), 159-176.

Thus, the aged can no longer play their roles as social reformers and custodians of the people’s culture.⁴⁸ This situation could be a subject for further studies from the *Igwebuiké* perspective, to see how we can reconcile structural development and material progress with the core values of our being Africans, with respect to our *Igwebuiké* credo.

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⁴⁸ A. S. Ajala, The Changing Perception of Ageing in Yoruba Culture and Its Implications on the Health of the Elderly, in *The Anthropologist* 8/3 (2006), 181-188.

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